Are You Ready?

Data-driven tools can help contractors with recovery efforts.

By Johnny Clemmons

The next Atlantic hurricane season has arrived, and early forecasts hint at above normal activity again in 2018. This raises the question: What can the construction industry learn from the record-setting hurricane season of 2017 that could help it prepare for and respond to another disruptive storm season? The research and consulting firm Gartner, addressing disaster supply chain risk and recovery in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, urged distributors and manufacturers in the building industry to plan for a recovery-related surge in demand lasting “at least two years.”

The Right Tools

The likelihood that disaster recovery efforts will be more frequent, longer-lasting and broader in scope as a result of climate change puts a premium on tools that give construction companies a new degree of visibility into their own operations and those of their partners, along with a heightened capacity to respond in times of crisis and otherwise. Exactly what types of investments could construction companies be making to better equip themselves to answer the call when disaster strikes?

Digital solutions represent a good starting point. Based on what we’re seeing during the early stages of recovery from last year’s series of devastating hurricanes and wildfires, certain data-driven digital solutions are proving invaluable in helping construction companies get products, services and manpower to communities that desperately need them. Here are three areas where digital solutions can prove invaluable to construction companies in general, and especially to those that serve disaster-prone areas:

• Sourcing additional manpower. Following a disaster, finding and mobilizing additional workers becomes a huge human resource challenge for construction enterprises. Take a contractor who’s involved in a recovery effort that needs additional framing carpenters on a temporary basis as an example. Having a digital vendor management tool that enables enterprises to easily search for and connect with framers who are available for short- and longer-term work in a specific geographic area is essential. It’s even better if that tool is cloud-based and part of a broader, scalable digital HR/ERP platform capable of handling the back-office challenges that tend to accompany an elastic workforce.

• Locating housing for your core workforce as well as additional workers. The ability of an enterprise to play a key role in disaster response and recovery depends on having a fully enabled and engaged workforce. That starts with ensuring your company can find housing for its own employees and their families who have been displaced in the aftermath of a hurricane, wildfire or other disaster. The company also may need to find housing for additional workers they bring on
for a recovery effort. An integrated digital travel/expense/invoice platform such as SAP Concur not only can help an enterprise locate temporary housing, it also can handle employee communications, travel booking, expense reporting and reimbursement, invoice processing and payment, and other functions that might otherwise get overlooked when disaster strikes. Here again, a solution that readily works with a broader HR/ERP platform can be especially valuable.

- Material sourcing logistics. What happens if damage from a disaster prevents a construction enterprise from sourcing building materials from the suppliers upon which it usually relies? And what about keeping pace with the massive demand surges that tend to accompany disaster recovery efforts? Having a dynamic, data driven procurement platform that offers transparent real-time insight into product availability, product demand and vendor accessibility is key to minimizing supply chain disruptions and keeping materials flowing into disaster-affected markets. Such a platform should be able to draw from internal and external data sourced from various points along the supply chain to give construction companies visibility into exactly which materials are needed where, as well as which vendors have product to meet projected demand. This visibility should be there throughout the entire life cycle of a recovery, as material needs shift from cement, concrete, roofing and lumber to drywall and finish materials.

From a strategic standpoint, integrating these types of digital solutions into a construction enterprise makes good sense. The improved transparency, efficiency, capacity and responsiveness that these tools provide not only help companies step up to play a stronger, more visible role in helping communities rebuild after a disaster, it also gives them a digital platform on which to build a more efficient, more responsive and ultimately more profitable operation, one that is constructed to thrive at the confluence of digital technology and climate change.